

## A Transformative Vision for the RCA Archives

by Dr. Elizabeth A. Pallitto, Archivist

The old Dutch Reformed Church motto, “*Eendracht maakt macht*” (unity creates strength) can be interpreted anew: in the clear light of the transformative vision in Revelations 7:9. True unity – *een-heid*, the etymological opposite of *apartheid* – creates strength. The RCA’s transformative progress from apartheid to anti-racism to inclusion to belonging is very much in the spirit of the original Reformed Church motto. Personally, I was drawn to the RCA by the denomination’s willingness to enact transformation within and in the world. For me, a living faith – a faith that is open to change – makes sense, for change is constant and it is real. May this vision of an RCA composed of “nation, tribe and tongue” become transformed into a glorious reality.

From its beginnings in New Netherlands, the life of the Reformed Church is held in the Archives. One may think of archives as dusty old boxes, but they are full of life: *vital records*. Those old record books contain lives touched by the church: the birth and baptism of a newborn (*geboren*), the promise of a couple proclaiming their vows (*getrouwd*), or the line of black ink that records an interment: *gestorven*. On the micro level, finding a 1950 baptismal record is just as important as locating an ancestor from 1694 for PBS’s *Finding Your Roots*. On the macro level, the archives hold treaties with kings and governors, records of disagreements, discord, dismissals, and denominational changes – including past restructurings.

When the denomination embarks upon new ventures, that history is preserved in the archives. Diverse media record diverse missions: letters mourn a premature death in the mission field or celebrate a new school; photos celebrate a new hospital as it breaks ground. Even the day-to-day operations of the RCA involve the Archives: requesting materials for a presentation – and of course, storing them -- legal, financial, and administrative documents (e.g., minutes and Commission records). The RCA’s deliberations in 1876, or 2004, inform its present decision-making. These records show how debating, voting, and legislating practices inform the RCA’s unique governance.

From the perspective of archival history, restructuring is not the end of the world; it is the beginning of a new chapter in the ever-transforming RCA. An archival perspective shows us that even these growing pangs are as part of the RCA’s stated mission of transformation toward a more just, more righteous unity (*een-dracht*). In this diverse one-ness, there is incredible strength.